

Diana Bryson: Okay my name is Diana Bryson and I am the [assistant] curator of collections at St. Petersburg College working with the Foundation, and today we are talking with Dr. Goliath Davis on the topic of Minson Rubin, who was a historian and educator that was very important in the history of St. Petersburg. Thank you, Dr. Davis, for talking with me today. I am excited to learn more about Mr. Rubin during this call.

Dr. Goliath Davis: Thank you.

Diana Bryson: If we could start with you giving a little background on yourself, because you have a very rich history in St. Petersburg and I could tell everyone what I Googled about you but I think you could probably give us a better summary of that!

Dr. Goliath Davis: Well (chuckles) I usually prefer that someone else tells my story but I'm, as you said, a native of St. Pete. I was born here in the city of St. Petersburg in an area called a Methodist town. I was delivered by a midwife - Ms. Roxanna Donaldson. I'm the eldest of ten kids, I went to local schools during the period of segregation. I graduated highschool and went to Rollins College where I obtained my Bachelor's Degree. From Rollins to the University of South Florida to get my Masters Degree and then to Florida State University for my Doctorate. I worked in the city of St. Petersburg for nearly 40 years. 28 years were spent with the St. Petersburg Police Department where I rose to the rank of Chief of Police. I retired from that position in October of 2001 and from there went down to City Hall to work with Rick Baker as the Deputy Mayor for

Midtown Economic Development.

Diana Bryson: Awesome, thank you for that. Although we could talk about the rich history of St. Petersburg and your influence in this community, this conversation is really geared to talking about Minson Rubin. Can you tell us a little about him and your relationship with him? Maybe start with how you got to know him and how that started.

Dr. Goliath Davis: Well, I didn't know Minson personally, meaning that he and I didn't have a close personal relationship. My acquaintance with Minson was based upon the fact that he was a pillar in our community and our paths always crossed in terms of his work and what he did. I call Minson a remarkable individual and always found him to be very kind and thoughtful and he was very pensive. He thought very deeply about a whole host of issues but his forte was what I call storytelling or history. He collected stories, documents, and other memorabilia about the time that he lived. With that they were [he was] to document education, segregation, sports, politics, and a whole array of things. It made it very easy for anyone following him who may not have known the history of St. Pete to get a sense of what it was like during those periods.

Diana Bryson: Yeah, and I think that coming across Mr. Rubin's collection has been amazing for me because, you know, with how fast the city is developing we are bulldozing over history every day and it's one thing to make a city more beautiful and try to get a greater sense of economic development but it's another thing to forget and not present the past. So I feel really grateful to have Mr. Rubin's work and these collections.

He did grow up in Jordan Park, right?

Dr. Goliath Davis: That's correct.

Diana Bryson: He was born in St. Pete- do you know what hospital he was born in, I just haven't been able to find that? I know he was born in 1944.

Dr. Goliath Davis: You know, if you were born in a hospital at the time it was in Mercy Hospital. That's why I indicated that I wasn't born in a hospital, I was delivered by a midwife.

Diana Bryson: True. Mercy was the Black hospital, right?

Dr. Goliath Davis: Mercy was the Black hospital during segregation. He lived in Jordan Park and Mercy Hospital was on 22nd Street just north of 15th Avenue. He was in close proximity to that hospital.

Diana Bryson: I found some of the documents related to Dr. Ernest Ponder who was the city's first Black doctor working at Mercy Hospital and because of Minson Rubin we have been able to have those documents and learn from them. But I know since Rubin was born in this community, he had this true love for it, and inspiration to make others know that love that he had and facilitate a real care for this community-- and I think a lot

of that he did through education. He went to all of the local schools here, then went to FAMU to get a degree in Education and then he continued most of his career here in St. Petersburg, right? As an educator?

Dr. Goliath Davis: Absolutely. That's why I call him a storyteller because his love for the community and his passion for what had transpired in the community's history was such that he leaves a rich legacy. As we grow and expand, and historical relics are folded over you can go back to Minson's work and get some sense of what our community looked like prior to what we now call progress.

Diana Bryson: Right.

Dr. Goliath Davis: The interesting thing about that is that you have an opportunity through his work to get a real good sense of what community values and interest were and how those values [were] molded [in] individuals such as Minson and how they internalized those values and went on to do exceptional things. You talked about Dr. Ponder and Minson's work, if you look, I'm sure you will find Dr. Fred Alsup who was the first African American doctor to practice at what was then called Mound Park but is now known as the Bayfront Medical Center. So Minson would tell those stories by collecting artifacts, news stories, anything that would document that history to include photographs as well.

Diana Bryson: You had mentioned the values of Minson and the values of the community, could you talk a little bit about what those were? What he hoped to show were the values of this community?

Dr. Goliath Davis: Yeah, we spoke earlier about Minson being the quote unquote “man of his house” and how at early ages African American males, him included, would take on manly responsibilities and basically do things that fathers, and others, would also do in a household and a community. Those values transcended the home and went into the educational institutions and work ethics and so forth. You had so many people basically doing the same thing that it created a sense of community, a sense of closeness, where everyone would assist everyone else in terms of making sure needs were met. There was a real sense of pride in who the individuals in the African American Community were. Even when you went to school. You watch kids today with their pants bagging and so forth, but you were immaculate in terms of your dress. your hair-do and hair style. Those are the kinds of things I like to pull out from the Gibbs Highschool yearbook or Gibbs Junior College Yearbook. I show my kids and say, you see this, right? I mean the kids there in coat and ties, just dressed to the nines, and that pride was just so well felt. It just basically was shown in everything that you did.

Diana Bryson: I mean it makes sense that there was this pride in education -- it had to be earned and fought for. Gibbs High School was built in 1927 and they didn't have a gym, library, auditorium, sports field or anything like that. A lot of getting those basic needs met came from grass roots community efforts from our South Side Black

communities. I think that what you're saying about the pride that these students took in being able to have their education there is a little bit different than what typical students think when we all roll our eyes as we have to get out of bed to go to class-- because we weren't directly affected. Our parents didn't have to fight for us to be in these school systems and that's something that's really important for young people to understand, how hard our older generations had to fight to give us this accessibility to education- you know?

Dr. Goliath Davis: Absolutely and you try to instill upon young kids that things you guys take for granted didn't come easily. You know, people had to fight and sacrifice. I mean you take the vote for granted, some of you don't vote -- and that's not a good thing. But when you talk about educational initiatives and ball fields. Minson was an athlete, he was a basketball player as well. If you look at his collection you will see a lot of the history surrounding segregation and basketball and what that meant. You will see how the legacy transcended all the way down to Freddy Dowes on the Gibbs Basketball team at Gibbs Highschool, and the tournament that used to be played at what used to be called the Bayfront center in downtown St. Pete. Essentially, you had segregated white teams playing Gibbs - the powerhouse all Black team - and the pride just flowed. These [the games] would be sell outs to watch that kind of athletic competition come about. But those are the things Minson is noted for documenting. It [his collection] runs again from medicine, to sports, to education, even religion- you will find so many religious individuals documented as well. So that's why I say you look at it in terms of him being a pillar because anytime you wanted to know anything related to the history of St. Pete, you wanted a perspective, you could always go to Minson and he could help

fill in the gaps or pieces that were missing. It's so important to know the history if you are going to do things to honor those who preceded you and more importantly to ensure that you carry on some of the legacies' that were so highly fought for and didn't come easy. That's the real value I see in Minson's work, it chronicles life during a time when we were separated but it's just so ripe with lessons on how not to make the same mistakes and how we can move forward to do things that are beneficial not only for Black folk but for man/womenkind.

Diana Bryson: I think one thing that I really enjoy about his collection is that so many of the pieces in it show people's perspectives in things. These newspaper articles, that give specific accounts of what was going on, have helped me and can help other people to understand the human nature of the evolution of St. Petersburg. It's not just about this fast progression of things that happened, it shows that when the schools were desegregated in the 1970s, that transition was really hard on the students. Gibbs High School went from being an all Black school to a school with only a 30% Black student population. I'm sure that is something that really affected the community and I'm not sure that's something I would have ever considered because in school they taught that desegregation was this happy thing and that we were all all of a sudden great friends and able to sit at the same lunch table, just like that things were over. But after reading some of those newspaper accounts that talked about desegregation here in St. Petersburg specifically, it seems like there were a lot of people against that. It's like there was almost a Band-Aid [placed] on things to a certain extent.

Dr. Goliath Davis: Integration in St. Pete was painful when it began and is still painful to this day. Another reason I like to pull out Minson's pieces but also pull out the yearbooks for my kids, is because I like to talk about how today if you walk into a highschool you [often] won't find African Americans in French Club / Spanish Club but if you look at yearbooks during segregation, we were all of that. We were included, it was painful to see those traditions kind of erode and move away. For example, Gibbs High School. In that area people either went to Jordan Elementary or Wildwood. I went to Davis elementary school because I lived in Methodist town and we all had a common bond - most of us met at 16th St Junior High and the idea was that you would go from Davis Elementary / Wildwood on to Gibbs. If you were an athlete, you wanted to go to Gibbs for that pride. If you were a musician, like I was a percussionist, so at 16th St I played drums for Mr. Samuel Robinson, and our colors were green and gold. The beauty of it was with your green and gold you knew you could make the next step and go to Gibbs because their colors were blue and gold so you didn't have to purchase another dror anything. So if you were a musician you wanted to play for Sam Robinson and Prof Davis. That was the key, Sam at 16th St. and Pross at Gibbs. Unfortunately, I didn't get to make that transition to Gibbs because I ended up at St. Pete Highschool and my drumming days ended (laughs). If you watch the HBCU College band, not only the musical talents, the showmanship was what we looked for at Gibbs. When you went to the Caucasian highschools, you didn't get that level of showmanship, it wasn't fun. I said "I can't play drums at St. Pete High because they had a white cadence." I mean our cadences were always rheumatic and what have you, and I'm sure if you look through what was occurring at 16th Street we had a guy named DD, he just died recently. He is probably chronicled in Minson's work as well. But during segregation during the

competitions for states, Christmas parades or whatever the quote unquote “colored bands” were always in the back. My grandmother and mother worked for white families, cooking, cleaning, and what have you, and those families would always say, to my mother Bee or my grandmother Josephine, “you know we always wait until the last minute because we’ve got to see those colored bands because that’s what they got to show”. I say that because trying to create that sense of appreciation for young African American kids today is something that you struggle with but fortunately Minson provides a ready source of documents, photos, and histories that you can go back to and say “look at this” and use that as a point of reference for telling the story and it really makes a difference- you know? I don’t know if he knew it intuitively or he just knew it but he basically set into motion, and he was so passionate about it, a real dynamic that allows us to understand the future by looking at the past and understanding the present by looking at the past.

Diana Bryson: I think that is a great way of putting it. Going back just a little bit to talking about the comradery that was created through the music. You mentioned that a lot of his collection is the importance of the churches in these communities, and the importance of the schools. Then inside of the schools, the importance of music and sports and that sense of community that lifted other people up and I think that, for me, reading through Minson Rubin’s documents they help lift up all of this history. I mean, how else would anyone find out information like this without talking to people like you or without him presenting his work? As a curator at St. Pete College now, it’s been a blessing to have this information presented to me. It’s funny when I think about Minson, I always think “I just missed you” [since] the world lost him earlier this year, in February.

I wish I could have thanked him for his work because with his work we are going to be able to give a lot of resources to this community that are going to help in the future. With all of this progress happening, it's at least going to give people a background in understanding ways people can think about the streets that they are walking on and pay respect to those who paved these roads in a sort of sense.

Dr. Goliath Davis: Well you know we are thankful that you are where you are because Ms. Ann Taylor and I, (she started long ago) were wanting to ensure that Minson's work was placed somewhere we could enjoy them in perpetuity. She was always impatient and rushing because we didn't know how long he was going to last. He lasted a lot longer, in terms of his life, than anyone anticipated. He was involved in Gibbs High School hall of fame as well, where every year they pull out early sports stars and sports scholars to recognize them for their contributions not only to the school but also to society. That's a part of that Gladiator pride. Let me just kind of paint the picture for you, when you talk about that Gladiator pride, I go to those hall of fame [reunions] because, like I said, a common spot was 16th Street Junior High School and with integration we all splintered off and went to St. Pete High, Boca Ciega, Dixie Hollins where there was nothing but riots because they didn't want black folks there. But for my class, class of 69, we always enter with the class of 68 because they are still very organized but with that splintering it just split us up. We just had a class reunion, it was a big one, and the class of 69 reunion consisted of individuals from St. Pete High, from Boca Ciega, from Lakewood, wherever and our common core was Davis elementary, 16th Street, and Wildwood. But I've never gone to a St. Pete High class reunion. When we get back together with the class of 69 it's like your back with family and friends. You just didn't

have that type of comradery and affinity when you were at those other schools. I think about it and I always relate it back to our history, and that history that Minson has documented. We excelled academically, athletically, and musically but now with integration we are fighting the achievement gap. All of a sudden our kids can't learn but when you look at Minson's work and you look at the academic component, medical component, and sports components you had people that cared about you and cared that you were going to be the very best that you could be and they pushed that. We got lost in the system when we went to integration, really lost. It's pretty painful, pretty painful.

Diana Bryson: I was going into education before starting a career in the arts and I had some internships at Fairmount Elementary and Campbell Park and there was a fourth grader who told me he was already planning on dropping out. I remember thinking, after growing up in suburbia, in North Tampa, that dropping out was never something I had even thought about. Definitely not in fourth grade either. But that moment taught me a lot about how lost the education system is right now and how much help it could get. As an arts professional we are often on the forefront of gentrification, community development, and trying to beautify districts but I am a firm believer that an equal amount of money that goes into city beautification should go back right into education too. I think there is work to be done in St. Pete Schools but I also know that there are teachers and people working now to help.

Dr. Goliath Davis: When I critique the schools: you have teachers from all walks of life. Just like in medicine, you have some people who are not the very best, [and] you have

some of those teachers. But for the most part you have folk out there that are trying to do their best for everyone. I always thought that the administration and the people who sit in their ivory towers don't really understand what is happening on the ground. You don't get to talk to the people on the ground, or get their input, but you come up with a whole lot of stuff that makes their lives very difficult. I tip my hat to educators because they have a really, really, tough job.

Diana Bryson: So just kind of wrapping up this conversation, what do you think - because I think Minson's career was truly centered around education and [highlighting] freedom through education- [for] economic mobility, and stability, things that every person wants. What do you think, how do we move forward from here? Presenting Rubin's work is one thing but what do you think this community needs, even when they are struggling this many years after segregation, still hurting. How do you think we move forward? What are your thoughts with that?

Dr. Goliath Davis: You talk about Minson's work, and the fact that education - that used to be our mantra - I mean that's what teachers told you all the time. That's what parents told you "education is the key, it's the way up and out." Now you find kids who don't really embody that. They think about a whole lot of other things but not necessarily education. What I would like to see when we present Minson's work is along with it, a listing of - I don't know if you'd call them inspirational slogans - but what that work represents can be motivational for people who stand and look at the work and also for the kids who see it. Just a reaffirmation of education is the key, a reaffirmation of values- they are important, they matter, internalize them. I think that the work is so rich.

Faith is important, you can be anything you want to be if you dedicate yourself to working hard and overcoming any obstacles that someone may put in your way. That's the essence of what Minson was documenting and what we lived through. Colored water fountains, white water fountains, so forth and so on - those are the kinds of things that we look forward to. I hope we take this Collection and look at it then ask ourselves "what are the lessons learned?" "How do you, not only pictorially, codify those lessons in such a way that you can give young people inspiration in an understanding of what happened and transpired in the past that paved the way for them?" and why is it incumbent upon them to pick up on these lessons and keep moving forward.

Diana Bryson: Right, right. Well thank you for that, all of this just brings me to the thought that you all, that have come before us, have put so much love and devotion into this soil that we have been planted in. For us not to recognize the ground that we are growing in, or those that have taken care of the land we are in, makes no sense -- and that's not going to help other crops either, if we look at it that way.

Dr. Goliath Davis: just to use your metaphor, I would say that the hanging of Minson's work is another attempt to take all of that history and re-fertilize the soil so those that are currently planted can grow or be nurtured.

Diana Bryson: Any last thoughts or closing remarks about Minson or what we've talked about?

Dr. Goliath Davis: The thing that I would say about Minson Rubin is thank you. Thank you for your dedication and commitment to documenting and preserving a way of life that's so instructive for everyone who watches it and everyone that comes behind you.

Diana Bryson: Thank you Dr. Davis, I'm going to go ahead and stop recording this.